

Jhansi Rani Lakshmi Bai

■ Talk by Vivek Somasundaram

■ 2008 Indian Independence Day Celebration,
Saturday, August 16, 2008, 1-4 PM

■ RA Gray Building, 500 S Bronough Street, Tallahassee, FL
32399, USA

SYNOPSIS

In continuing the tradition of speaking about Indian Freedom Fighters during the Independence Day Celebration, Vivek Somasundaram, on the 61st anniversary of Indian Independence, will speak about Rani Lakshmi Bai, Queen of Jhansi. Vivek will remind the audience that not all the Indian Freedom Fighters were men. Several women like Rani Lakshmi Bai courageously fought the British and gave their lives for the freedom.

TALK

EARLY CHILDHOOD

Lakshmi Bai, who would later become the Queen of Jhansi, was born on November 19, 1835 in Kasi to ordinary Hindu parents Moropant Tambe and Bhagirathi Bai. She was named Mani Karnikka (one of the names of for the sacred river Ganges) but was called Manu. Soon after she was born, Manu lost her mother and was raised by her father. Moropant Tambe soon had to move to Bithur, since his employer passed away. While living in Bithur, Manu had an unusual childhood that probably shaped her future. Since her mother passed away and her father was busy, Manu often played with Nana Sahib, Rao Sahib, and Bala Sahib, children of a Maratha peshwa (prime minister). There Manu learned to read, write, and more importantly learned to ride horses, how to use swords, fly kites, and race.

MARRIAGE

Manu's father was a respected man who often traveled to the court of Raja Gangadhar Rao of Jhansi, a Maratha kingdom in northern India. The Raja was a widower with no children and his older brothers all died with no children. So when Raja approached Manu's father about the marriage, Moropant consulted astrologers and they told him that Manu having been born in Kasi, (Hindu's most sacred place) had qualities of Laskhmi, Durga and Saraswathi (wealth, valor, and knowledge) and so destined to be a great person. In 1842 Manu was married to the Raja and she became the Rani (Queen) of Jhansi at the age of 8. As per

Indian royal tradition Manu was given a new name and it was Lakshmi Bhai and then onwards she was called by Rani Lakshmi Bhai of Jhansi. There is a legend that says that during her wedding she ordered the priest to tie her robe properly to that of her husband when she saw it was not being done correctly. People of Jhansi were shocked to learn her courage and started to accept her as their queen immediately.

QUEEN of JHANSI

In 1851 Lakshmi Bhai gave birth to a baby boy but the child died within few months. Sad things continued for the young Queen. In 1853 Raja Gangadhar became very ill. Since it was an Indian royal tradition to pass-on the kingdom to a male child and since their only male child had died, people close to the king requested that the King and Queen adopt a male child. The King was hesitant at first but agreed to adopt Damodar Rao, a child from his extended family. All the while the King was worried that British East India Company which was expanding may not accept their adopted child. During this time Governor General Marquess of Dalhousie was in charge of the India. So the king and queen have specifically asked British Major Ellis and Captain Martin to be present for the adoption ceremony. Shortly following the adoption and on that day the King died. The Queen was only eighteen years old and with a small child.

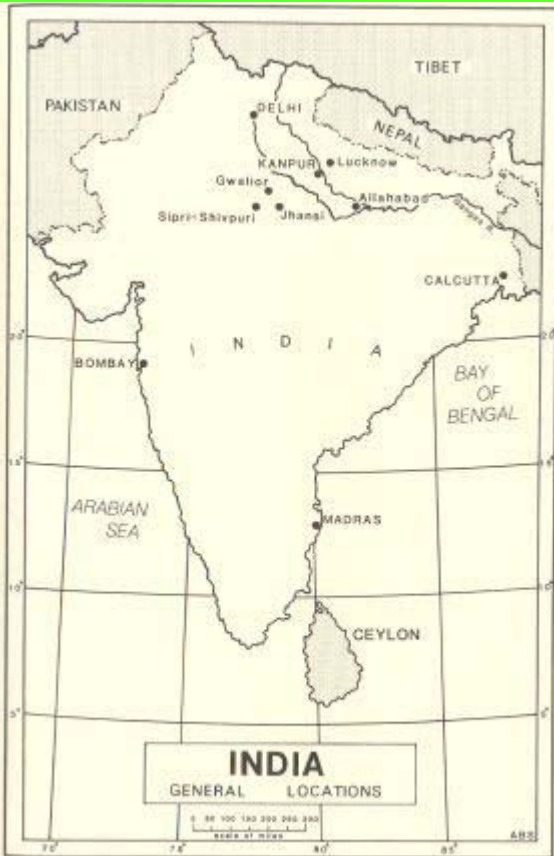
DIFFICULT TIMES

Even though Raja of Jhansi had a reasonably good relationship with the British, the British wanted to take over the kingdom of Jhansi. In order to do that they used a rule called "Doctrine of Lapse". According to this rule if an Indian king died without an heir, the kingdom will be governed directly by the British Government. The Queen appealed to the British that she should continue to rule the kingdom until her son came of age. However, the British didn't accept her argument or the adoption of the child, even though it was done in presence of British officers and while the king was still alive. All the appeals of the Queen were ignored at all levels. The British wanted the queen to retire, take a pension and live in a bungalow. Her husband's property would be taken by the British leaving her with little money; the people of Jhansi would also lose all the jobs and security they had enjoyed. The people of Jhansi and Queen were very upset. But, during all this time the Queen was training herself the people of Jhansi for warfare.

FIRST INDIAN WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

While this was happening in Jhansi, on May 10, 1857 the Sepoy (soldier) Mutiny of India started in Meerut. This incident will become the starting point for the first war of Indian Independence. The mutiny started because both the Hindu and Muslim soldiers resented the fact their new bullets for their Enfield rifles were coated with pig/cow fat. It was offensive to both religions. But British insisted on

the use (due to the bullets range and precision) and started to reprimand anyone who disobeyed. In addition, there was genuine desire to be freed from the British Empire. But unfortunately, during this rebellion several British men, women, and children were killed by the people of India. The rebellion started to spread from Meerut through the Gangetic plain since many Hindu priests had predicted it. The British became very concerned and wanted to quickly end the rebellion.



Map by Brent Schmocker

Jhansi and India Map. From a book by J. L-Chapman. © U Hawaii Press.



Fig. 2. Portrait of the Rani said to have been painted by an artist who knew her. The original is in the possession of the Tambe family, Nagpur.

Jhansi Rani Lakshmi Bai. From a book by J. L-Chapman. © U Hawaii Press.

DEATH OF THE QUEEN

The kingdom of Jhansi was located in an important intersection between Delhi, Lucknow, and Allahabad and Queen of Jhansi became one of the persons involved in the rebellion. She was already upset with treatment she was receiving from the British, so she issued a proclamation to both Hindus and Muslims to fight against the British. In 1857 the Queen successfully defended Jhansi from the neighboring Rajas of Datia and Orchha. In 1858 the British soldiers started to advance toward Jhansi and later that year put a siege on the city. Soon the city would fall and many people will die. However, Rani fought courageously and escaped disguised as a man taking her young son with her.

She quickly reached near by Kapli and joined the forces with people of that city and fight. That city also fell. So the Rani joined the people of Gwalior and continued the rebellion. During the battle of Gwalior the Queen of Jhansi was killed by the British. Even the commander who captured the city said that “(the Queen) was the bravest and best of the rebels”. Because of the Queen’s courage, bravery and sacrifice she would become one of the famous Indian Freedom fighters. She was not only a role-model for freedom fighters but also a role-model for Indian women’s causes.

Thank you for listening to me.

REFERENCE:

- 1) The Rani of Jhansi, Joyce Lebra-Chapman, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1986.
- 2) The Rebellious Rani, Sir John Smyth, Muller, London, 1966.
- 3) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rani_Lakshmibai
- 4) <http://www.copsey-family.org/~allenc/lakshmibai/index.html>